

‘WASHINGTON SLEPT HERE’

Harmony marks visit from George Washington

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Historic Harmony president Rodney Gasch helped install a marker along Washington's Trail on Thursday, George Washington made camp in 1753. By a happy coincidence, Gasch said the marker was installed on borough 270 years ago. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle

HARMONY – On Nov. 30, 1753, George Washington was setting up camp in the rolling borough.

By a happy coincidence, volunteers from Washington's Trail installed an informational commemorating his visit 270 years to the day.

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The G20
was established
in 1999

“I didn’t even know it was that day,” said Martin O’Brien, founder of the trail, laughing.

“George Washington slept here,” the marker reads, planted just behind the 1809 Harmonist barn on Mercer Road. The marker rests along Washington’s Trail – a historic driving route through Western Pennsylvania, marking a 21-year-old Washington’s fateful military and diplomatic venture through the region.

O’Brien, now chair of Washington’s Trail, said he founded the organization to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Washington’s journey in 2003.

“We got some money and we started putting up the red, white and blue signs all through the trail,” he said. “Especially up around Moraine State Park, but they go from Butler County north to Waterford, (Erie County), to mark Washington’s trail.”

In addition to the iconic road signs marking the trail, O’Brien said the group began installing informational markers along it in 2020, beginning in Moraine State Park.

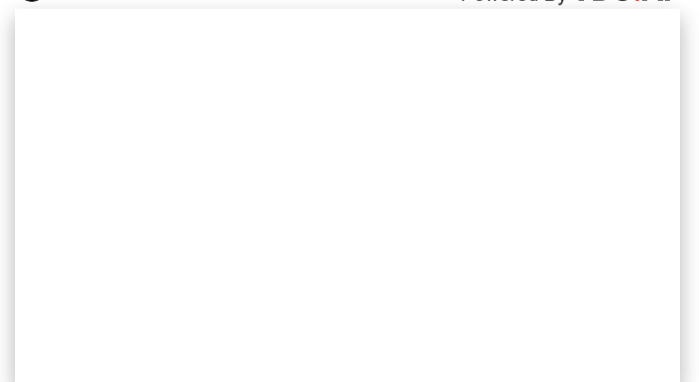
“We tried to put a little local history in it about Washington being in that vicinity,” he said.

The Harmony location represented the organization’s fifth marker, funded with part of a \$5,000 American Corner “Preserving America” grant.

O’Brien said he hoped the new Harmony marker left visitors with “a little knowledge.”

‘Great things’

“I hope they appreciate the fact that great things happened in Butler with Washington,” O’Brien said.





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Martin O'Brien founded Washington's Trail in 2003 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of George Washington's 1753 trip through the county. O'Brien installed his fifth informational marker along the trail in Harmony borough Thursday, Nov. 30. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle

The new marker was made possible with the help of Harmony Museum and Historic Harmony, the borough's dedicated historical society.

Historic Harmony president Rodney Gasch and vice president Gwen Lutz — also volunteers with Washington's Trail — said the society got approval from the borough before installing the marker at their historic barn.

"Everybody's very supportive of history here," Gasch said. "People are happy to support our efforts and to talk about the history of Harmony."

Gasch said the new marker — and Washington's Trail as a whole — represented an "important part of Washington's life."

"Washington was just 21 years old, so like a college student, and he gets sent on this diplomatic mission to see whether there's French troops and soldiers here, because Virginia and Great Britain had claimed this land" Gasch said. "This was really a formative thing for Washington."

Following the trail to Fort Le Boeuf in present-day Waterford, Washington was tasked with delivering a letter demanding a French retreat from the British claim.

"And then he has to report back to the governor of the Virginia colony and say, 'Yes, I did see the French here; I gave them your letter which said, 'Please leave,'" and they gave Washington a letter that essentially said to the British, 'Stay out of New France,'" Gasch said with a laugh.

But it was 28 days after Washington's rest in present-day Harmony that his story — and the story of the United States — was very nearly cut short, according to O'Brien.

Famously, a Native American guide — sympathetic to the French — shot at Washington and missed on Dec. 27 while his group was just in Connoquenessing Township.

"Had Washington been killed in Butler County, he would not have been there to hold the Constitution, the revolution and the first presidency of the country together," O'Brien said. "We probably would not be a democratic republic."






Historic Harmony president Rodney Gasch and vice president Gwen Lutz – also volunteers for Washington’s Trail – helped install a marker in Harmony borough Thursday, Nov. 30, recognizing a place where George Washington made camp in 1753. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle



Martin O'Brien, pictured right, founded Washington’s Trail in 2003 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the county. With assistance from Historic Harmony president Rodney Gasch and vice president Gwen Lutz, he installed his fifth informational marker along the trail in Harmony borough. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle

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GEORGE WASHINGTON SLEPT HERE




George Washington in his Virginia Regiment uniform. Painting by Charles Wilson Peale, courtesy of Washington and Lee University

On November 30, 1753, 21-year-old George Washington, a major in the Virginia Regiment, camped near here while on his first diplomatic mission. According to the journal entry of Washington's frontier guide, Christopher Gist, the group encamped on the (Connoquenessing) creek, and traded with natives for corn and dried meat.

Washington was sent to western Pennsylvania by colonial officials to locate French forts in the Upper Ohio Valley and deliver a letter demanding the French immediately leave lands claimed by the British. Washington's travels, and the French strongholds he discovered at Venango (now Franklin, PA), Ft. LeBeouf (now Waterford, PA) and Ft. Presque Isle (now Erie, PA), led to the French and Indian War the following year.


Today you can follow Washington's 1753 travels using the blue and white Washington's Trail 1753 signs, or by visiting WashingtonsTrail.org

Shared Prosperity




Father Georg Rapp, painting by Phineas Staunton, courtesy of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Old Economy Village.

Some fifty years later, Father Georg Rapp, a charismatic German religious leader, founded Harmony on the banks of the Connoquenessing Creek. It was the first home of the communal Harmony Society. By 1814 the community had grown to about 800 people and 130 buildings. The Harmony Society then sold their property to Mennonites from eastern Pennsylvania and relocated to Indiana. About two dozen Harmonist buildings still stand in Harmony's National Historic Landmark District.



The route George Washington took is shown in yellow. Credit: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division





The First Shot by Deac Mong

A Dangerous Journey


On December 26, 1753, during Washington's return to the Virginia colony, he passed about 5 miles east of here (near present day Evans City) where a native offered a faster route through the wilderness. After a few miles the native stopped at a clearing, turned, and fired his musket at Washington. The shot missed, ending a presumed French plot to prevent Washington's return. Some consider this the first shot of the French and Indian War.

Signs donated by Washington's Trail 1753 with funding from Americana Corner





Follow in George Washington's "footsteps" by driving Washington's Trail 1753 through western Pennsylvania. Watch for the blue and white highway markers. They closely follow Washington's 1753 travels. The signs were erected by Washington's Trail 1753, a non-profit formed with the mission to educate all ages about Washington's 1753 journey. For more information, scan this QR code or visit www.WashingtonsTrail.org.



SCAN ME

Volunteers from Washington's Trail and the Historic Harmony dedicated a marker Thursday, Nov. 30, at the site where George Washington camped 250 years ago – to the day. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle

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